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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 000881

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [YM](#) [DEMOCRATIC REFORM](#) [DOMESTIC POLITICS](#)

SUBJECT: YEMENI ELECTION HEATS UP

REF: A. SANAA 875

[B](#). SANAA 818

[C](#). SANAA 706

[D](#). SANAA 263

[1](#). (U) Summary: With three days left in the campaign, Yemen's April 27 parliamentary elections dominate the political scene (refs b and c). The opposition Islah party looks likely to gain seats against the ruling General People's Congress (GPC), although no observers predict that the GPC will lose its majority. A war of harsh words between the political parties has not yet escalated into violence. Yemen has declared April 27 a "weapons free day" in another measure to help ensure peaceful elections. More than 30,000 international and domestic election observers will deploy to assess the conduct of Yemen's third parliamentary election (ref a). End Summary.

Predictions Difficult,
but Islah Will Likely Narrow the Gap

[2](#). (U) Even though the campaign is almost over, predictions of probable winners remain complicated. Clear differences in campaign issues are for the most part difficult to discern between the parties, leaving the process of the campaign a more important factor in its outcome. A well organized campaign by the Islah party, coupled with what some observers call poor candidate selection by the GPC, make it likely that the wide gap between the GPC and Islah in the last parliament will be narrowed from the previous 223 to 64 margin.

[3](#). (U) Evidence of the Islah party's strong campaign is clear. Islah party activists are going door-to-door in their constituencies asking citizens for their vote. Their campaign literature is well-composed and modern in style, with clear and concise messages. Islah party banners, posters, flags and mountain sculptures of their party symbol, the sun, blanket Sanaa, Marib, Aden and other areas of Yemen. In contrast, while the GPC has also blanketed Yemen with such material, there is little evidence of door-to-door campaigning or well-crafted campaign literature. As one GPC Shura Council member lamented to Pol/Econoff, the GPC is like an elephant when it comes to embracing modern campaign methods -- if one grabs its foot, it takes a long time for the touch to reach its brain. He also noted that being in government allows for laziness in the campaign, while being in opposition makes their supporters motivated to work hard. According to him, the strong Islah grassroots campaign has many GPC party leaders concerned.

[4](#). (U) Informed observers expect the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) -- which boycotted the 1997 election -- to gain between 10 and 15 seats, with small numbers of other seats going to various smaller political parties and independents.

Campaign Rife with Partisan Fighting

[5](#). (U) A battle is waging via faxes, newspapers, electronic media and word of mouth between political parties accusing each other of unfair campaign practices and violations of election law. Accusations run the gamut from exploiting government property for campaigning to using rhetoric intended to incite to tearing down each other's posters to interfering with campaign rallies. Opposition parties also raised concerns about the use of State media in favor of the GPC and various actions by the Supreme Commission for Elections and Referenda (SCER), including allegedly preventing some opposition party election commissioners from working and erroneously eliminating some candidates by citing improper registration. Observers characterize these complaints, however, as minor.

[6](#). (U) Disputes in several constituencies have caused concern and, in some cases, direct action by the SCER. For example, according to the UNDP, the election has been suspended in one constituency because one political party continues to hold hostage a ballot box from the 1997 elections.

[7](#). (U) Despite reported clashes in several constituencies, there are no reports of deaths as a result of violence.

The Al-Ahmar Clan Straddles Both Sides;
A Son Clashes with Governor

18. (U) Leader of the Islah party and former Speaker of Parliament Sheikh al-Ahmar has five sons running in the elections, three for his Islah party and two for the GPC. In an example of tribe triumphing over party, one GPC candidate son is being contested by a powerful Islahi Sheikh from the same tribe. It remains to be seen if this is a serious challenge that could engender violence or insurance to make sure the seat remains within the tribe.

19. (U) The eldest al-Ahmar son, an Islah party candidate, clashed with the GPC governor of Amran on April 16, injuring several, when the governor was campaigning in the son's district. The SCER responded by suspending the election in that constituency, while the governor offered his resignation in protest. However, according to a Shura Council contact, the dispute has been resolved after high level discussions sponsored by President Saleh. The election is on, and the governor is still in place.

"Weapons Free Day" Declared;
Sporadic Violence Still Likely

10. (U) The SCER announced early this week that election day should be "weapons free," a move echoed by ROYG officials. The first announcement of its kind in Yemen, it encourages all Yemenis to leave their weapons at home to ensure a peaceful election. The UNDP and SCER voter education project will include wide dissemination of the directive as part of its overall outreach efforts, which are widespread. Education efforts include television skits, radio spots, banners, cars with megaphones and information tents in all areas of Yemen. Some of the other messages disseminated by the project include assuring voters that their ballot is secret, encouraging citizens to exercise their right to vote, reminding women to vote and instructing voters to only vote once.

11. (U) The call for a "weapons free day" is part of several moves by government, political parties and other stakeholders to discourage violence during the election period. Yemen has experienced sporadic violence in every one of its elections and voter registration periods since unification, including more than 20 killed during the 2001 local elections and 7 killed during the 2002 voter registration. The SCER will not allow any weapons inside voting centers. A widely publicized "Code of Honor" was signed April 9 by 22 political parties to encourage all parties in Yemen to conduct free and fair campaigns and refrain from electoral violence (ref d). Spurred by an initiative from IFES and NDI in late 2002, President Saleh took sponsorship of the Code, formed a committee of political parties and came to an agreement. While the initiative has significant symbolic power, neither the Code nor the committee has any enforcement measures to ensure that the signatories live up to the measure.

12. (U) A decision pushed by the political parties that was issued by the SCER recently threatens to heighten tensions on election day. Because Yemen does not have a tradition of citizens holding identity documents, internationals and the SCER had intended to allow citizens to vote if they forgot their voter registration card or other identification as long as their name and photo could be verified on the voter lists and attested to by all commission members. For reasons unclear to the UNDP director of the election support project, the Islah party refused to go along with the suggestion. This decision could increase the likelihood of clashes on election day as voters without ID are turned away from the polls.

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